

Fante Confederacy

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The **Fante Confederacy** can refer either to the loose alliance of the Fante states in existence at least since the sixteenth century, or it can refer to the short-lived Confederation formed in 1868 and dissolved in 1874. The Confederation is seen as one of the first self-rule movements in Africa.

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Fante expansion

The Fante had long been in the region both inland and on the coast of what is today Ghana. In the sixteenth century they began to expand along the coastal areas in order to defend from foreign invaders. The establishment of the confederacy was a proclamation of the several small independent kingdoms that made-up the Fante tribes.

The standard explanation has long been that the Fante states were forced to form a confederation by the rapid growth of the Ashanti Confederacy in the early eighteenth century that began to threaten the security of the surrounding region. Sanders argues that the same forces that were driving the expansion and centralisation of the Ashanti, the lucrative trade with the Europeans and the introduction of firearms and other weapons, also fueled the increasing unity of the Fante.

The Fante united and produced a confederacy to be recognised not only by the people of the Gold Coast, but also by the European powers. The confederacy was headed by the Chief of Mankessim, who was given the title of Breyni. It was the obligation of highest Chief to respect the wishes of a council of the leaders of the other major towns. Despite a similar political structure the Fante never managed to become as united as the Ashanti, though their differences were overcome when their kingdoms were under dire threat. During the early eighteenth century the Fante expanded at the expense of smaller neighbouring states eventually annexing the lands of the Asebu, Cabesterra, and Agona. The Fante were allies of the British who supported

their efforts against the rival Dutch, who were aligned with the Ashanti. The Fante Confederacy was smaller than the Ashanti, but through their control of the coastal trade and close links with the British the Fante became the administrators of the entire Gold Coast. The Fante leaders were the best educated and wealthiest of the people's in the region.

Conflict with the Ashanti

For the first half of the eighteenth century the Ashanti were pre-occupied with expanding their confederacy to the north rather than against the stronger coastal groups. The next few decades saw internal disputes within Ashanti. The Fante subsequently intervened, lending material support to rebel groups in Ashanti and offering safe harbour to refugees and dissidents fleeing the Ashanti Confederacy. The Fante introduced laws forbidding the selling of firearms to the Ashanti and curtailing the amount of trade that could pass between over Fante lands, cutting off supplies to the confederacy.

By the early nineteenth century the Ashanti had consolidated the large parts of the middle region under their rule and began to plan for a full-scale invasion of the Fante Confederacy. In 1806 the Ashanti-Fante War began. The British felt unable to intervene and acknowledge Ashanti control of the region.

The British continued to work with the Fante to curtail the Ashanti. With advice from the British in 1811 the Fante again went to war. While defeated in open battle the Fante were able to win the war by forcing the Ashanti to withdraw by employing guerilla tactics. For the next several decades the Fante worked to play the Ashanti off against the British while maintaining their independence, over time, however, British influence came to dominate the Fante lands. In 1844 the Fante leaders agreed to a bond with the British that made the area a protectorate of the British, but guaranteed internal control would remain with the local rulers.

Tensions with the Europeans

However, the British soon began to exceed the agreement, and intervened in life along the coast. The Fante leaders were much displeased, and felt the British were only interested in their trade. The most controversial action was an 1868 agreement between the British and Dutch to trade forts along the coast. Previously the entire coast had been a mix of British and Dutch forts. The British and Dutch governments agreed to exchange forts whereby the British would control all the forts east of the River Kakum, and the Dutch would get all the forts to the west, including most of those in the Fante areas. It has also been argued that the local elites were angered by the abolition of the profitable slave trade by the European powers.

These factors greatly annoyed the people throughout the region. Legally the local rulers saw the Europeans as tenants, and they demanded to right to approve the fort exchanges. The local rulers were not even consulted before the agreement was announced. The Fante also worried about the close relations between the Ashanti and the Dutch.

Creation of the Confederacy

This led to an 1868 meeting of the leading Fante and also representatives of the Denkyira, Wassa, Twifu, and Assin who met in Mankessim and formed a Confederation. The group proclaimed their loyalty to the British protectorate, but also demanded the right to self-government. They also promised to prevent the Dutch from assuming control of the forts in the area.

The new state had a King-President at its head and below him a council of kings and elders and a national assembly representing a larger portion of the population. King Ghartey IV (c. 1820-1897)^[1] of Winneba was elected as the first King-President, while King Nana Amfo Otu Gyandoh I of Abura was placed in charge of the armed forces. The new government created a standing army of some 15,000 men, introduced a poll tax covering the region, and most importantly a judicial system that asserted the right of the Confederation, not the British, to mete out justice. This Confederation was paralleled in the east by the Ga-led Accra Native Confederation

Amfo Otu marched the new army to Komenda to join that city in its effort at preventing the Dutch from taking control of the fort vacated by the British. This effort was successful and the Dutch were rebuffed. Amfo Otu next turned to trying to take Elmina, the centre of Dutch power on the coast. The effort to storm the city failed and the Fante forces became bogged down in a long war.

In 1871 the constitution was rewritten and a new Executive Council was created. Amfo Otu and Edu of Mankessim were elected co-King-Presidents, but shortly Amfo Otu's role was switched to the General Field Marshal and Edu became the sole King-President.

Fall of the Confederacy

The long fighting around Elmina soon began to drain the resources of the state. It proved unable to collect much of the poll tax, and the British refused to allow the Confederacy to tax lucrative trade in the region. For a time the Ghartey brothers funded the state out-of-pocket, but soon the Confederacy was all but broke. Moreover, the fighting with the Dutch and its allies had left the northern part of the Confederacy, on the border with the Ashanti, undefended and these regions felt the Confederation was failing to provide the needed protection.

British reaction to the Confederacy was mixed. Originally, the British had little interest in directly administering the region themselves and some felt a self-governing European style state was a positive development. However, other British representatives in the region and in London saw the Confederacy as a dangerous precedent that was anti-British and doomed to failure. The Dutch, while winning militarily against the Fante, could little afford to fight a war in West Africa and decided to abandon the entire Gold Coast. The British, now in control of the entire region, approached the leaders of the Confederation and offered them money and to defend them against the Ashanti if the Fante acquiesced to being annexed to the Gold Coast. This was done, and the Confederation ceased to exist in 1873.

References

- "King Ghartey IV of Winneba", Magnus Sampson, *Makers of Modern Ghana: From Philip Quarcoo to Aggrey. Volume One*, Accra: Anowuo Educational Publications, 1969, pp. 52-67.
- Sanders, James, "The Expansion of the Fante and the Emergence of Asante in the Eighteenth Century", in *Journal of African History*, 1979.

External links

- Constitution of the New Fante Confederacy.
(<http://www.modernghana.com/news/123177/1/constitution-of-the-new-fante-confederacy.html>)

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